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ABSTRACT

The study's purpose was to compile descriptive information about a small band of Algonquin Indian seasonal agricultural workers from Quebec, Canada who migrate annually into Ontario County, New York to work on the fur and poultry farms. Although these Indians have worked in the State since 1945, no "serious" study had been made which included their home life in Quebec, reasons for migrancy, types of work done, and conditions of employment while on the farms. Therefore, a 35-minute slide/tape presentation illustrating the home life was prepared. The Reserve was visited 9 times since 1970, for approximately 3 days each time. Cassette recordings were made of: (1) several conversations with the band's Chief, band counselors, and teachers; and (2) traditional Algonquin songs sung by some of the older people and young children. The presentation illustrates and describes housing, educational programs, medical and dental problems, production of native crafts, and traditional pursuits of these Indians. This report discusses how this presentation has been used and the initiator's continued involvement with the Algonquins. Also included is a narrative which was included with a proposal for a full-time outreach worker to work with the white, Indian, and Puerto Rican families on the fur farms in East Bloomfield, Ontario County, New York. (NQ)

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ALGONQUIN PORTRAIT: A STUDY OF THE RAPID LAKE SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKER

by

Paul R. King

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Paul R. King holds a B.A. degree from Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio and a M.S. degree from Alfred University, Alfred, New York. He is currently writing the dissertation for the Ed.D. degree from SUNY at Buffalo. Since 1970 he has been an assistant professor of sociology at Alfred State College, Alfred, New York. Extensively involved with the problems of various disadvantaged groups, he has taught in a pilot In-Camp Migrant Education Program for the Algonquin seasonal agricultural workers near East Bloomfield, New York since July, 1971 and serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors, The Harvest Center, Prattsburg, New York. He is co-developer of the Men's Treatment Program for the inmates of the Steuben County Jail, Bath, New York. He has also served as a consultant on the problems of acculturation of Sub-Artic Indians to the conference The American Indian Student in Higher Education held at St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York.

ABSTRACT

Algonquin Portrait: A Study of the Rapid Lake Seasonal Agricultural Worker

A* slide/tape presentation illustrating the home life of the Algonquin Indians from Rapid Lake, Quebec, Canada was prepared following nine visits by the initiator to the Reserve since 1970.

The slides and sound tape illustrate and describe housing, educational programs, medical and dental problems, production of native crafts, and traditional pursuits of a small band of Algonquin Indians. Since 1945, many of these people have migrated into New York State to work on the fur and poultry farms near East Bloomfield, Ontario County.

Already the presentation has been found to be most useful to explain to various concerned groups background information about the Algonquins and to describe some of the rather unique problems of migrancy these people face while focusing attention on types of aid acceptable to the Indians without being paternalistic or meddlesome.

* Available for use at the Geneseo Migrant Center

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to create a body of descriptive information about a small band of Indian seasonal agricultural workers from Quebec, Canada who migrate annually into Ontario County, New York to work on the fur and poultry farms. Even though these people have worked in the State since 1945, no serious study had been made which included home life in Quebec, reasons for migrancy, types of work done, and conditions of employment while they were on the fur and poultry farms. The slide/tape presentation deals mainly with home life on the Reserve with subsequent reports on the other aspects of migrancy to follow.

OBJECTIVES

The foremost objective was to create visual, audio and descriptive materials illustrating the home life of the Algonquins from the Rapid Lake Reserve, Quebec.

A secondary objective of the study has been to identify those areas of concern such as health problems, economic and social problems, along with the transitional cultural dilemmas, faced by these Algonquins as they leave traditional hunting and trapping pursuits on the Reserve to enter the mainstream of Canadian and United States society.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURE

After first getting to know some of the Indian families employed on the fur farms, the initiator was able to discuss the project with an anthropologist friend who had worked extensively in Iroquois and Algonquin communities both in the State and in Canada. He assisted in making further introductions to the people at Rapid Lake. Since then the initiator visited the Reserve nine times during the past two years, staying approximately three days on each visit. Rapport and a trusting relationship has been established through the distribution of needed clothes, school materials and toys along with spending considerable time engaged in conversation and the activities at Rapid Lake. On four visits a photographer from Alfred State College, Mr. Chester Galle accompanied Mr. King to do the photographic portion of the project from which slides have been selected for the slide/tape presentation. Cassette recordings were made of several conversations with the Chief of the band, band counselors, and teachers. A most interesting series of traditional Algonquin songs sung by some of the older people and young children was also made.

In order to obtain expert medical information about the causes of some of the health problems among the people on the Reserve, a medical services biologist, Professor David Schwert and a dentist, Dr. John Campo also visited the Reserve with them. On still another trip, a federal lawyer accompanied the team to explain to the Band legal rights and procedures the people were guaranteed while working in New York State.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Since the body of the study is the slide/tape presentation, which lasts approximately thirty-five minutes, this portion of the final report will deal with how the presentation has been used and the initiator's continued involvement with the Algonquins.

The presentation has been used several times at Alfred State College in sociology and anthropology classes in order to illustrate some of the basic concepts, such as socialization, status, role, and class, prejudice and discrimination, the policy, and value systems. Some viewers have stated that they also experienced a type of cultural shock as they were informed of a society much different from their own.

Some of the students' comments are as follows:

" . . . this presentation . . . gave a clear and understandable view of how the Indians are now living. I feel terribly ashamed that the white man has so mistreated the Indians -- we took their land and now we aren't even giving them half a chance for a decent life."

"After seeing the slides of the Algonquin Indians, I feel that I have gained a better understanding of the problems of all the Indians."

"Often people are unaware that such conditions exist in places outside their own environment. Through the slide presentation, I have become acquainted with a totally new society."

"The slides gave a definite cultural shock to me and they must have to anyone else who has thought about what the slides showed. The slides give an overall picutre of how these Algonquin Indians live . . . Such neglect of these people by the doctors, social workers, and police was one of the most disturbing aspects of the plight of these Indians . . . The slides on the people themselves, their homes, their feasts and their celebrations gave an idea of the social lives, customs and emotions of the people."

The slides have also been shown to various community groups in the Alfred area. They have responded most generously with gifts of clothing, canned food, toys, and materials which were used in the school at Rapid Lake.

Through the invitation of Mrs. Barbara McCaffery of the State University College at Geneseo faculty, who teaches in-service individualized instruc-

tion course, to area public school teachers, the presentation has been used to illustrate current problems of migrant youngsters and to suggest ways in which local teachers can use similar materials in their own classes. Most importantly though, the slides seem to help make teachers more knowledgeable about Indian problems today and to create an empathic understanding of those students black, white or Indian who are "different" in terms of ethnic background or socio-economic status.

Through the initiator's work on this project and in conjunction with his work in the pilot In-Camp Migrant Education program sponsored by the New York State Migrant Center, the information gathered has been used to help start a day care center for the children of the workers on the fur farms. It is expected that this will become an on-going project in the community of East Bloomfield-Holcomb.

Although the persons involved in the project became quite disturbed about the lack of health care facilities available to the people at Rapid Lake*, this presentation has stimulated them to find medical and dental services for the people once they are on the fur farms. Last summer many of the people received medical and dental care at the New York State Migrant Center at Geneseo. During the fall and winter and now this spring, the people on the fur farms have been able to receive free health care at the Project REACH Clinic, Perkinsville, New York.

The most exciting outcome of the project has been the employment of a full-time outreach worker for Ontario County who can give long-needed attention to the problems of the people on the fur farms. The grant was funded by Program Funding, Inc. (See attached narrative which was included as part of the justification for the position.)

It is hoped by the initiator that this project will not be considered "finished" but that it will mark the end of a stage of study of these Algonquin migrants and will lead to other studies and projects which might cover specific problems such as alcoholism, alternative employment for Reserve Indians, and acculturation problems of Algonquins striving for just economic opportunity.

* The dentist, Dr. John Campo, volunteered to do dental work on the Reserve during his stay but in checking with dental officials in Canada and Quebec, we were told he would have to speak French and pass a licensing examination in French before he could do any work.

NARRATIVE

Introduction

The following narrative is included with the proposal for a full-time outreach worker to work with the white, Indian and Puerto Rican families on the fur farms in the town of East Bloomfield, Ontario County for the following reasons:

In as much as the work on the fur farms is not just seasonal in nature, although there is a two-month period in November and December when the number of people employed on the farms triples, there are at least 102 persons and approximately eighteen families affected by conditions on the farms.

Furthermore, it is apparent that at least one mink farmer does not comply with the law in regard to method of wage payment, in providing adequate housing for migrant workers, in providing information to his workers about social services available, nor does he provide information to his workers concerning day care centers and health care facilities. If such a callous attitude, coupled with a type of paternalism most often associated with owner-slave plantation days continues, the people working on the farm need a defender of their rights who cannot be threatened by loss of job or be intimidated by implied or real threats to his well-being by disclosing to proper authorities conditions of employment and housing on the fur farm.

The narrative also describes the writer's interest in the fur workers and what he and a few others have attempted to do to date to improve conditions on the farms. Certainly there is much more to be done which would justify the employment of a full-time outreach worker.

It should also be noted that if the bias of the writer seems to be heavily pro-worker and anti-farmer, this is because of his involvement with the workers over the past eight months on a regular three-times-a-week basis. What may appear to be prejudiced opinion is based upon actual observation and knowledge of a most heinous type of exploitation of agricultural workers who for the most part are powerless to correct the abuses which affect themselves and their families physically and emotionally. When possible, I have informed authorities of illegal conditions on the farms. The statement of one lawyer employed in a federal program of legal aid to migrant workers is illustrative of the problems on the farms. She stated that in legal problems alone, a lawyer could be involved fifty hours a week in trying to rectify just the legal abuses of the people.

I stand ready to explain and to justify any and all statements made in the narrative.

Background

During the summer of 1970, I was a participant in Workshop for Teachers of Migrant Children conducted by the New York State Center for Migrant Studies, State University College, Geneseo, New York. Part of the requirements of the workshop included working with migrant children under the supervision of a master teacher. I volunteered to assist with three- and four-year-olds. One

of the children in the group was a four-year-old Algonkian Indian boy who came to the Demonstration School at Geneseo by bus from the Bennett Fur Farms, Town of East Bloomfield, Ontario County. This child, Howard Ojinany did not speak any English, only his Algonkian language. More importantly, this small boy was "a medical disaster area." His teeth had rotted into the gums, he was ill with ear aches and a sore throat and was constantly plagued with a runny nose. His infections were so serious that he was losing his hearing and needed prompt medical treatment. Other children who came from the farms were also ill and poorly dressed.

At that time, no one in the Demonstration School knew much about the Algonkians, conditions on the fur farms, or the adequacy of services available to the people who worked on the fur farms.

I visited the fur farms during that summer and was appalled by the conditions on the Bennett fur farm. Many of the Indian workers were housed in units which had been converted from chicken coops. The Indian workers were isolated from the other workers along a farm road. It was quite clear that the owner of the farm did not wish visitors on the farm. A locked gate and a sign with "NO TRESPASSING WITHOUT THE PERMISSION OF THE OWNER" was conspicuously posted.

Since that first visit to the fur farms, I have been interested in the conditions on that farm where it seemed that the workers were virtually wage slaves of the owner. My interest turned to shock and anger when that October, four-year-old Howard Ojinany and his mother died in a house fire on the Bennett farm. At that fire, the fire chief told an Indian adult that something had to be done to improve the housing or else others would also perish similarly.

Other people on the farm told me that they were earning $1.40 an hour when the minimum wage was $1.50. Upon a report to the State Labor Department and a subsequent investigation, the owner was forced to pay the minimum wage retroactively to the date when it became effective.

This past summer I was employed, along with Miss Claudette Swan, a teacher from the Rapid Lake Reserve, to teach in a pilot In-Camp Migrant Education Program for adults and teenagers to work on the fur farms with the Algonkians. Mrs. Anna Rodriguez was employed to work with the Puerto Ricans on the farm.

Together we were able to offer sewing, food preparation, basic adult education, arts and crafts, recreation and some entertainment activities. Miss Swan and I were also able to assist in setting up a day care center for the children of the workers during the pelting season. The day care center was funded by the N.Y.S. Department of Agriculture and Markets.

Through an extension of the grant for the In-Camp Program, I was able to stay working part-time on the fur farms. During the past eight months of this part-time work, it has become most evident that the problems confronting these migrant workers are such that a full-time outreach person is needed.

The problems fall into these general areas: transportation, health needs, social services, job hazards, legal counseling, vocational and educational opportunities (including bi-lingual education), housing, wages, conditions of employment, religious needs, acceptance by the white community, acquisition of clothing, appliances and furniture, and day care facilities. The above list is by no means exhaustive but does indicate the enormity of the tasks which must be undertaken in order to guarantee the full rights to which the workers are entitled to.

Further Explanation of Some of the Above Problems

Transportation--Few of the people have cars of their own. They find it difficult to go shopping, to go to the laundromat, to get to the doctor, to check out new jobs, to visit friends, or even to seek out entertainment in the community. It is not intended that the outreach worker would become a taxi driver; instead the worker could evaluate the need and arrange emergency transportation.

Health Needs--Many of the people have unmet medical and dental needs, many have never been to a medical doctor or to a dentist. They need treatment at clinics usually after their working hours. For the past several months, I have been able to bring people to the Project REACH Clinic in Perkinsville. Such visits should be continued and some people have been identified as needing referral treatment. Others have untreated eye problems that little to date has been done for due to the lack of transportation, funds, or medicare coverage to assist them.

Job Hazards--Often the workers have been bitten by the mink or injured on the job. The people need tetanus shots, quick medical treatment by a doctor when hurt and they need information on how to get workmen's compensation when they are injured on the job.

Constant contact must be maintained with the State Labor Department and the Department of Health in order to report violations of law when uncovered. Again, it must be noted that the outreach worker must not be intimidated by the owners who do not relish any type of monitoring of their operation.

Social Services--Most of the workers are eligible for present social services, such as medicaid, food stamps, welfare grants based on income and number of dependents, and public health nurse visits. The workers need to be informed of their personal rights under welfare regulations and need to know how to apply for benefits.

There is also much that could be done to assist in planning for a day care program this fall and winter. The worker can expect to get full cooperation from some interested persons in the community, from Project REACH the Department of Agriculture and Markets and from the New York State Migrant Center.

Much more could be included to justify the position for a full-time outreach worker for the migrant workers and to assist those persons who have dropped out of the migrant stream and who have resettled in the Bloomfield area. However, let me conclude by saying the need is great and that the people are asking for these services; these services would not be imposed upon a group of people uninterested or unwilling to accept assistance which very well might lift them out of conditions of despair and hopelessness.